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A CONVERSATION BETWEEN CAUVERY MADHAVAN, AUTHOR OF  
*THE TAINTED* (2020) AND ROCHELLE ALMEIDA, AUTHOR OF  
*BRITAIN'S ANGLO-INDIANS: THE INVISIBILITY OF ASSIMILATION*

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**ROCHELLE:** It is a privilege to lead Pequot Library's first-ever trans-Atlantic 'Meet the Author' event via zoom which, I hope, will be the first of many.

Our guest today is novelist **Cauvery Madhavan** who is joining us online from her home outside Dublin, Ireland.

Hello Cauvery and congratulations on the publication of your novel *The Tainted* which I enjoyed reading and which is a worthy addition to the body of literature on and about Anglo-Indians. For the benefit of those participants who have not read your book, would you please summarize the plot for us?

**CAUVERY:** My book is called *The Tainted* and it is loosely based on the mutiny of the Connaught Rangers regiment that had a very illustrious history from when it was first started in the late 1700s. It served all over the British empire on every continent wherever the empire was based. In 1920, at the height of the Irish freedom struggle in Ireland, the regiment was stationed in India, in Jullunder in the Punjab.

Because of what was happening in Ireland with the British -- which included extremely cruel acts of a group of militia called the Black and Tans -- Irish soldiers in India mutinied. My book is loosely based on what happened at the time of the mutiny.

It actually also includes the aftermath of the mutiny and what happened to the people left behind in India. The book is set both in India and in Ireland—one half is set in the 1920s and the second half is set in the 1980s.

**ROCHELLE:** You have been living in Ireland for over thirty years. And your story is about a true historical event--the revolt of the Connaught Rangers (which you call the Kildare Rangers in your novel). Were you looking for an aspect of history that would bring India (the land of your birth) and Ireland (the land of your immigration) together in a work of fiction? I'm interested in knowing how you came upon this historical event and decided to fictionalize it.

**CAUVERY:** It was pure luck, actually. I stumbled on to the story by accident. I had just finished writing *The Uncoupling*, my second novel. It was in the process of being printed and had not yet been published. In fact, I was editing it at the time, when I happened to be at an event in the Indian embassy in Dublin and I literally overheard a conversation between two people about how the Indian flag was inspired by the Irish flag. Now I don't know how true that is—it might only be a myth, but it intrigued me. Two people were discussing the mutiny of the Connaught Rangers in India and how the Union Jack was pulled down and the Irish flag had been pulled up on the parade ground. Apparently, that was one of the inspirations for the Indian flag. It was still the early days of the internet and Googling, but I went home and straightaway looked it up as I had never heard about this incident before. I became fascinated by it. In fact, within a day or two of discovering it, I was immediately drawn to the story, and I knew immediately that it would become the plot of my next book which is *The Tainted*.

**ROCHELLE:** The chief protagonists of your novel are Irish-Indians, a small part of the larger mixed-race Eurasian community in India--the human legacy of European colonialism on the Indian sub-continent that are called Anglo-Indians. What made you bring the Irish-Indian community into your plot? I'm interested in knowing how you decided to bring this small Indian racial minority--the Irish-Indians from a small place in South India--into your novel.

**CAUVERY:** Again, that was pure accident. When I started writing the book, in fact, as soon as I started researching it, I realized that there was a story in the aftermath as

well. The fact that this young Irish soldier, Michael Flaherty, met and fell in love with an Indian girl, Rose, in India... in the 1920s, well...the realms of possibility narrowed it down to only one community that would have had contact with regiments and soldiers. And that just happened to be the Anglo-Indians because they would have been more cosmopolitan, more forward-thinking. So, the chances of British soldiers meeting them would have been greater. Once I began researching the book, Rose, an Anglo-Indian woman, who started off as a minor character, simply took it over. Once she got into my head, there was no stopping her. Anybody who has read the book would know that she and her descendants populate the whole book.

The more I researched it, the stronger came the realization that in the three hundred or so years that the British empire existed in India, there had always been Irish people who helped run that empire. And wherever the Irish men went--well, not just Irish men, but all men—when they left their homes and went away for years on end, they ended up having children with local women. Some of these liaisons were formalized and some were not. When this happened, hundreds of thousands of children were abandoned and not acknowledged by their fathers' people. Now, they could have been Irish, and they could have been Scots, Welsh or English. But in India, they were all clubbed together as 'Angrezi'...which would be translated as 'English'. I find it amazing that in India and in Ireland, outside academia and outside history, very few people know that so many Irishmen left behind progeny in India.

**ROCHELLE:** There are two things that strike me in your response: It's amazing for us, writers, as we start on a work, that we have no idea in which direction it will go—the manuscript takes on a life of its own and the characters propel us in a certain direction. This seems to have happened to you.

The second point is this: the Anglo-Indians or 'Eurasians' were called different names in India, such as 'angrezi' or 'ferangee'. But apart from the community itself and academics such as myself, not a lot of people know about them—they are an extremely misunderstood minority.

You talk about discovering the Connaught Rangers' rebellion and Irish-Indians by chance. I'm curious to know what sort of research sources you used to write your historical fiction that brings together Irish history and the sociological traits of a small minority community in India at the same time that it brings authenticity to your work.

**CAUVERY:** Well, Anglo-Indians from the very start were highly educated. Even as far back as two or three hundred years ago, Anglo-Indian children were well educated and knew how to read and write. I say (they had this advantage—parenthesis mine) in contrast to a lot of other groups in India. Because of this, they wrote a lot—they kept a lot of diaries. I spent a huge amount of money trying to find and buy these antiquated books. It was a thoroughly enjoyable research experience. But I think that also because, from the 1930s onwards, the Anglo-Indians left India and migrated to Canada, Australia and to England, the diaspora kept in touch with each other via journals or newsletters...and all of those were a huge source of material for me.

I also found a lot of very interesting social history in books and letters written by women. There were a lot of ‘angrezi’—meaning English--women who were very bored in India. They were bored living in up-country, small, Hicksville kind of places...on tea plantations or jute farms or whatever. And a lot of these women were very articulate and wrote about their experiences as women. I found [their memoirs] a huge source. There were several Viceroy’s wives and sisters who had spent a lot of time in India and I got details about life at the very top from them as well as about life...if not at the bottom, then throughout India—from these journals. Unusually, also, there were a lot of nurses [from the UK] who went out to India from the 1920s onwards and they wrote a lot of letters which have been published in volumes. So that was the basis of my research on Anglo-Indians.

And of course, the whole military establishment is so meticulous about archiving details pertaining to every single thing; so there was no problem about sourcing material for my book from the military point of view.

**ROCHELLE:** Oh, those diaries and journals of British women in India are a real treasure! I remember, when I was doing research at the British Library in London for my own book on Britain’s Anglo-Indians, I would find a diary like this and become so fascinated that I spent hours reading it—although its contents were not directly related to my own work. I had to pull myself way from it to return to my own topic in order to stick to my own research schedule. These diaries were also written by Anglo-Indian women who spent time writing. In fact, it wasn’t just British women who went out to India as nurses. A lot of Anglo-Indian women in India became nurses and they wrote a lot about their experiences, especially during the wars, because they worked at the front.

So here is my next question which is related to perceptions of Anglo-Indian women: Your Anglo-Indian characters, especially your female characters, possess a lot of derogatory characteristics and tendencies that are generally associated with Anglo-Indians or Irish-Indians in India, e.g. their tendency to flirt with white men to ensnare them as husbands (as Rose does when she comes in contact with Michael Flaherty); their dislike of the sun for fear of getting a dark suntan; their affinity for Western dance and music especially playing and teaching the piano. I actually had such a fascinating Anglo-Indian music teacher myself in India that I ended up writing and publishing a short story about her. Does your book not further the stereotypical impressions that most Indians have about women of mixed-racial descent? How do you think Anglo-Indian readers or Anglo-Irish readers would react to this book? Have you had a chance to talk to any of them about this and how have they responded?

**CAUVERY:** Well, I was always conscious about not being Anglo-Indian myself while writing about them. And this matter [judicious representation of Anglo-Indian women] was always in the back of my mind as I wrote the book. But what I would say about the way I have portrayed them is that the impression Fr. Jerome, the priest in my novel, has about Anglo-Indians is the way most people in India thought about them at that time. I am hoping that my readers will see how unfair that was.

For me, the big—really huge—boost... a real bonus...after I wrote the book was that I happened to be in India at a conference in Madras seated near a lady whom I did not know at all. We got talking and when she asked me what I was doing there, I told her that I had written this book. I then gave her a rough outline of it, and she looked at me and said, “You know I am an Anglo-Indian and I take huge objection to the fact that you have called the book *The Tainted*.” I was taken back by this, but this was also exactly what I was prepared for. So, I gave her a copy of the book and asked her to read it. She happened to be a recently retired Professor of English Literature in a very prestigious college in Madras. Her name is Eugenie Pinto and I hope she gets to see this interview sometime.

Well, she read my book, rang me after a week and said that she would like to meet me. I was very nervous, but when we did meet again, she put her hands in mine and said, “I want to thank you for writing this book, for portraying us as we were and as we are, and for making no judgements.” We had lunch then and I found that she had made notations on practically every third page. She went over them with me telling

me all the things I had got right even while she queried a few things. On the whole, she was totally in love with the book. For me, there was no better endorsement than one coming from an Anglo-Indian woman herself. She was probably in her early sixties—she had seen life; she had read books and she knew the community. So, for me, like I said, that was a huge endorsement. I am hoping that people see how biased perceptions about Anglo-Indians were and are even to this day.

**ROCHELLE:** Well, I hope people see also that the Anglo-Indian woman has evolved so much over the decades—from Rose in the 1920s to the contemporary Anglo-Indian female character in your novel, May, who is so poised, self-assured, highly educated and doesn't have any of the feminine pretensions that have been stereotyped for so long. I too found your representation of your characters to be highly sympathetic and, like you, I do hope other Anglo-Indians read this novel and gain an understanding of your intentions.

But this brings me to your setting. You based your plot in a fictional place you call Nandagiri, in South India's Nilgiri Hills, in Coonoor. How well do you know this town? Do you actually know any people of mixed racial descent (Irish-Indians) still living there? Do you have any idea if they have any contact with their paternal side in Ireland? It would be interesting to know what the current connections/relationships are between Ireland and India.

**CAUVERY:** The actual historical mutiny of the Connaught Rangers took place in Jullunder, in the Punjab, not in Coonoor. When I was writing the first three chapters of my book, I named the regiment the Connaught Rangers—which is their real name. But when I was three chapters in, I realized I would have to fictionalize the regiment because every regiment has only one chaplain, one colonel, one adjutant and I was putting words into the mouths of people who had been real and had descendants. I didn't want to get into a situation where I would be pilloried for doing that. So, I fictionalized the regiment. I called them the Kildare Rangers and, of course, once I did that, it set me free to place the mutiny anywhere in India.

I picked South India because I am from Chennai myself...from the South. I was not very familiar with the Nilgiri range when I started writing the novel; but I made myself very familiar with it by the time I finished the book. [I did this] by traveling there. I trekked for weeks on end with a guide into the deep, deep jungle and got to know the

flora and the fauna of the place because I knew that one of my main Anglo-Indian characters, Gerry, was going to be a forest officer. So, I needed background knowledge.

Coonoor, till today, is a garrison town in South India. My father was in the Indian army and his regiment, the Madras Sappers, have a base there. So, I named my fictional town Nandagiri and based it on Coonoor.

As for meeting other Irish-Indians, unfortunately, I have never actually come across any. However, all my life, throughout my schooling years in Bombay, I had many Anglo-Indian friends. Some of my best friends were Anglo-Indian and I think I have always had an obsession with this community, and I have no idea why. I had Anglo-Indian teachers and friends. But as far as the book itself goes, I never came across any Irish-Indians. Maybe some of my friends in school in India might have had Irish connections--who knows? I have no idea.

**ROCHELLE:** It is interesting you say this because that was precisely why I went into Anglo-Indian Studies. I had wonderful Anglo-Indian classmates, friends and teachers in India. Of course, they became more and more scarce in Bombay as they emigrated out of India.

Also, as regards your field research, I was thinking there could be worse places than Coonoor to do research in India! I bet you didn't want to leave once you began. However, here is my question: a plot that spans almost a century—from 1920 'til 1980—calls for a certain level of sophistication and skill in trying to piece together the fortunes of three generations of an Irish-Indian family. Where did you develop this skill as a storyteller? Have you formally studied Creative Writing? What are the milestones on your journey into becoming a novelist?

**CAUVERY:** You're so kind. I have no formal training, no. My own university degree is in Economics. So, I have no formal study in English Literature at all. But I have always liked to write. I wrote for my school paper and then in college. My love of writing came from my love of reading--for which I thank my parents. They were huge readers. My father passed away a few years ago, but my mother still reads a lot. In fact, she was the first person to read my book.

As for your question about the wide scope and the ambitious nature of my plot, I don't even know how it happened. I hadn't plotted the book out. I only knew I wanted

to write about the mutiny...and that happens to be the way I write. I never know for sure where my book is going when I begin it. I know now that there is a description [or name] for this kind of writing. It is called Writing by Headlights, apparently. It's like you're driving in the dark and you can only see fifteen or twenty feet ahead; but as you go, the headlights of the car illuminate the road for you. And that was what happened with my other two books too, *Paddy Indian* and *The Uncoupling*.

With this book, I knew how it was going to end about three-quarters into it. As you know, my book is set in two time periods—the 1920s and the 1980s: when I first wrote the book, every alternate chapter was set in a different period. So my plot went back and forth. When my mother, who was the first person to read the book, pointed out that this did not work for her as she had to go back to the previous chapter to remind herself what had happened in the last one, I ignored it. But when my manuscript went to my editor, Joan Deitch—my god, my guru, to whom I owe so much as she had edited all my books—she told me that she wished to change only one thing. She wanted me to club all the chapters that happened in the 1920s together and all that happened in the 1980s together and, thus, divide the book into two segments. I did that and it transformed the book. It made it easier for the reader. She told me that I was expecting too much if I thought my readers would be so committed to me that they would actually go back and forth to stay with the story. I did as she asked and literally it was the best thing that ever happened to the book—the simple act of cutting and pasting the chapters together. I think I owe her a lot.

**ROCHELLE:** I think that was an excellent idea because as you said, it would have been much too confusing for your reader to have to switch back and forth between the two eras. Your book reminds me (and you must be familiar with it) of Ruth Prawar Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust*. She moves from the early 20th century and brings the plot into the 1970s. But at no point are readers confused because it involves such a skillful arranging of chapters that allows them to keep abreast of happenings through two different epochs.

This brings me to the writing process: You have talked about it already in this conversation; but people are always eager to know about a writer's creative process. I wondered if you have an outline on which you work before you begin. How do your books move from conception to publication? Do you keep revising as you go along? What's your creative process like?



**CAUVERY:** So overall, I don't plot the book, I never have. I know this sounds very vague, but I do trust my characters to tell me their story as it is going along. It sounds like a very peculiar thing, but it works.

I'm a very slow writer; so, for me 500 words, that is two pages a day, would make me so happy. I write very early in the morning. I wake up at half five—so I write from half five to nine. I am also addicted to golf; so, if I write, then I play golf as a treat. I find golf and gardening—my two hobbies—very much contribute to my ability to write as they give me my thinking time. And I've only just realized this, but literally, I think about my book all the time. Even when I am gardening, I am thinking, sometimes even aloud. I tend to look at my work again at night and make a few editing changes.

So, in terms of my process, I have just started my next book which is going to span the decades from 1930 right up to 2000. You see, because I wrote *The Tainted*, I am very familiar with the period right up to 1940s. I had absolutely consumed every movie set in the period from 1920 to the 40s—whether in India or in Ireland. But I have no idea about India in the 1950s—It is like a lost decade for me. So, I am now reading up on it and watching movies of that period. I hope this answers the question correctly.

**ROCHELLE:** Well, this is the sort of question about which there is no one correct answer. Everybody approaches writing differently.

Let's talk a little about Indians in Ireland. Leo Varadkar, who just finished serving as Ireland's Prime Minister, has an Indian Maharashtrian father and an Irish mother. How accepting were the Irish about having a leader of mixed racial descent—especially one whose father is non-European? What is the attitude of the Irish towards people of color or towards immigrants from other parts of the world living in their midst and now assuming positions of authority and political power?

**CAUVERY:** I felt so proud during the whole election campaign concerning Leo Varadkar—not just because I supported him or because of my political affiliations, but because, in Ireland, the fact that he was gay, half-Indian and the son of an immigrant, never came into the discussion. It was only after he was elected that the media jumped on the story and pointed out these issues. During the campaign, they did not come into any political debates.

Coming back to how Ireland has treated its migrant population, obviously there has been the rise of the Far Right in Ireland as in other parts of the world. But don't forget, the Irish are also a nation of migrants—they have migrated all over the world themselves. And this is not historical—it happens to this day. So most Irish families know what it is like to leave home, to have a family member away, to be desperate either to come back or not to. Let me put it this way, if we had felt unwelcome in Ireland, we would not have stayed.

**ROCHELLE:** You seem to have a very supportive group of writers from all around the world in Ireland, including writers from India, who seem to work closely together. How does that work?

**CAUVERY:** Yes, even before I started writing my novel *Paddy Indian*, in the pre-internet and pre-WhatsApp group days, these groups existed. There was one Irish writer—a very well-known children's writer named Sarah Webb—who used to organize a great deal of discussion about writing. She brought us together to meet once in two months, to have dinner and a chat. That support group broke up after a while because people just got busy. But that loose network of writers supporting each other happens often so that writers can get to know one another. After all, it is a small country. It has a population of just four and half million people. It's not an island...it's a rock. So, this sort of support group is very useful where I am based.

**ROCHELLE:** I am now going to take questions from the audience. Here is the first: How did you arrive at the title of the book?

**CAUVERY:** I called it *The Tainted* because it actually deals with three groups of people who are all tainted by association: Anglo-Indians by their mixed race; Irish-Catholic soldiers because they were Irish and were serving the Crown—in Ireland, they were considered traitors; and the third people are the Anglo-Irish community—children who are products of English and Irish parents. They were never English enough to be considered English or Irish enough to be Irish. And that sentiment continued right up to the last five or six years ago.

**ROCHELLE:** Can you talk a bit about the book's very attractive cover?

**CAUVERY:** The cover was designed by James Nunn, a well-known book designer. I really love the cover. He took his inspiration from vintage match box labels from the 1930s. I just love the type face and the image. They work so well together.

**ROCHELLE:** Is there a teacher or professor who influenced your writing?

**CAUVERY:** Yes, of course, there were a few. One was a Mrs. Sardesai, my English teacher when I was in high school in Bombay. And Mrs. Mehta, a geography teacher. I owe so much to my teachers. I get very emotional when I think of all my teachers who influenced me over the years.

**ROCHELLE:** Can you tell us anything about your next book?

**CAUVERY:** My next book is about a 90-year-old man, based in India, looking back on his life. It has a few historical Irish characters, but they are not the main players in the book that is set in India.

**ROCHELLE:** Most students are apprehensive about Creative Writing. How would you help them out or instill confidence in them to give it a try?

**CAUVERY:** Well, I would say that it is almost like any other job--you just have to sit at a desk and do it. And once you actually start writing the first ten words and then the first ten sentences, your writing will flow. So many people write in their heads; but a story is never done until it is actually written down on paper. I would say just sit down and write it. You don't need that special room or that special desk. You can write anywhere.

**ROCHELLE:** Students ask me all the time for advice as I too teach Writing. And, over the years, I tell them that I can boil down my advice to writers in just six words: Read, Read, Read; Write, Write, Write. That's the best advice I can give anyone no matter what medium or genre they choose to write in—whether for the literary page or for the screen.

**CAUVERY:** You're spot on. I am going to borrow that mantra from now on.

**ROCHELLE:** Did living in Ireland have a huge influence on your story in *The Tainted*?

**CAUVERY:** Yes, absolutely. Because Ireland contains so many Anglo-Irish, I realized pretty quickly that Ireland's attitude towards them was literally a mirror to the attitude of the rest of India towards the Anglo-Indian community. After living in Ireland, I observed their own peculiar circumstances. They were looked down upon and belonged nowhere properly. Of course, most of the Anglo-Irish would be better off financially than the Anglo-Indians are in India. But in terms of social challenges and perceptions, there are many similarities.

**ROCHELLE:** Are there any books you have re-read, and if so, which ones and why?

**CAUVERY:** I am a big fan of Barbara Kingsolver's books and a book I have gone back to three times is *The Poisonwood Bible*. I also have re-read *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides. What I have loved in both writers in their combination of history—real authentic history—blended into a family story.

**ROCHELLE:** Do you plan to write more about Irish culture and people?

**CAUVERY:** Yes, I do. My fifth book is going to be set in Ireland. I have a vague idea about it already. It will be set in rural West Cork—a part of Ireland I absolutely love. And I cannot wait to finish writing my fourth book so that I can start writing my fifth.

**ROCHELLE:** This has been a very interesting conversation, Cauvery, and I am very grateful that you made the time to talk about your novel. I wish you the very best as it goes out into the world.

**CAUVERY:** Thanks so much, Rochelle. It has been a real pleasure speaking with you and I thank you and the Pequot Library in Southport, Connecticut, for inviting me to participate in this event.